

Written Copy: Philippians 3:12-14 “The LORD Flipping Our Lives”

5th Sunday in Lent
Sunday, April 3rd, 2022

Text: Philippians 3:12-14

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Exegetical Statement (the text’s context)

The Circumcision Party: those that preached that the Gentiles must be circumcised to be full members of the Church had come and apparently spoke negatively about Paul, that he was an inferior apostle, and his message was lacking. Paul responds how by their own standards of worldliness he was superior as a dedicated Pharisee who persecuted the Church. But all those things he once was he regards as worthless trash only good enough for the refuse pile. Far surpassing is his faith relationship with Jesus Christ through which he as been declared to be in right standing with God, not according to his works but the salvation work of Christ given to him by faith. While he has been declared perfect, he now strives in his life lived under the cross to become in thought, word, and deed that perfected person he is declared to be in Christ. He has not attained this yet, but because he has been taken hold of by Christ through faith, he uses that faith to take hold of Christ as His Spirit comes alongside him in the struggles of a life lived out in faith. He is an ongoing work by the power of the resurrection that declares all who believe in Christ are being re-made into a new creation that will find it’s fulfillment body and soul on the Last Day resurrection. In his life Paul does not look back in guilt on the past, but with the confidence of faith that all is forgiven sets his sight on the completed renewal of the Last Day.

Focus Statement:

Jesus has grasped ahold of us and made us His own, giving to us all that He earned in His life, death, and resurrection, by which we are declared to be in right standing with the Father. He continues to work in our lives by the Spirit through baptismal repentance and the means of grace to change us from within, so that our thoughts, words, and actions are conformed to the perfection we will one day have in full on the Last Day.

Function Statement:

Why it’s important to know:

While the Law shows us that we fall short of who we are called to be as Christians, we can circumvent the painful work of sanctification by either settling to live like the world or try to make superficial changes in actions that fall short of the heart change that only happens in repentance. Superficial change will eventually be shown to fall short of the mark of perfection we are called to attain.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Work alongside the Holy Spirit who calls us to repentance and changes us as we participate in the mean of grace, not being satisfied with superficial change, but being patient and straining forward to the perfection He will complete in us on the Last Day.

Subject Sentence: Being Sanctified in Christ for Lasting Change

Flipping Houses-Flipping Lives

On my way to infusion in the morning I like to check in with what's going on in world. At the top of the hour, I can hear all the headlines on WWJ News Radio 950. Unfortunately, I always seem to hear the same annoying radio commercial for "Mike Buys Houses". "Yes, Mike buys houses, all kinds of houses, new houses and old houses, houses in good condition or houses in poor condition, even house in foreclosure". And best of all, for those in dire financial straits, he pays cash. Perhaps you've heard or seen similar adds on radio or TV or have even seen the signs posted at intersections around the city. This is all part of the business of "flipping" homes. Companies look to buy homes from those who don't have the ability or the finances to fix what is wrong and are in need of cash to get out from under debt. They pay the lowest price possible, find a contractor to come and do the necessary work to make the home attractive and livable again, and sell it in order to make a profit. They've created numerous Real Life TV shows about this very thing. But here's the problem they don't always mention: in order to attract buyers in a competitive market the reconstruction must be done as inexpensively as possible. And this opens the door for trouble. What kind of trouble? Real problems with the foundation and structure of a damaged home being covered over with drywall and paint, and new outlets being installed while dangerous electrical issues are left unaddressed. In other words, dress up what can be seen to hide what can't. People buy what they believe to be a beautifully restored home at a great deal not knowing that trouble lies ahead down the road.

People are not only in the business of flipping houses, but some seek to flip their lives and image. Famous people such as Hollywood stars sometimes need to do this after running into trouble that could end their career; someone like Will Smith, who has been in the news for slapping Chris Rock during the Oscars last Sunday. It was a tragic event in the life of a talented actor who was finally being recognized as such by winning an Oscar for Best Actor. In the aftermath Will Smith has apologized to those present and watching the show, the Academy itself as he tendered his resignation from it, and finally to Chris Rock. In response Will Smith has publicly said, ***"Jokes at my expense are a part of the job, but a joke about Jada's medical condition was too much for me to bear and I reacted emotionally"***, ***"Violence in all of its forms is poisonous and destructive. My behavior at last night's Academy Awards was unacceptable and inexcusable"***, and ***"Change takes time and I am committed to doing the work to ensure that I never again allow violence to overtake reason"***.

Now the question is what will it take to "flip" Will Smith's career back around? People are wondering if that is even possible in this current climate of judgementalism and refusal to acknowledge and accept apologies, or to accept that people actually can and do change. But other celebrities have recovered from disastrous life events, often in the hands of those who specialize in public relations campaigns aimed at painting the fallen star in a new light. They encourage and arrange for them to be involved in right public service movements, especially those that counter the offense the person committed. In Will Smith's case this

might be involvement in movements to stop the glorification of violence. Since some in the industry are defending him for what they believe was him standing up in defense of his wife who suffers from a medical condition that results in hair loss, it could involve his activity in positive ways to stand up in defense of women with similar problems. But whether or not this works to flip the tide of public opinion is yet to be seen. This is partially due to the fickleness of public opinion as well as the depth of change that Will Smith is committing to. In other words, it depends on the level of damage Will Smith is willing to admit lies within himself.

Paul Describing the Source of True Change

In our text Paul is working on the perception of how the Church in Philippi sees him. He is comparing the person he used to be with who he is now. He's not doing this to "flip" his image. This is not his campaign to increase his popularity with the Church in Philippi so that they like him more, or think that he personally is the greatest apostle. He is not doing this for his own sake but for the sake of the Gospel. He is using his own life to illustrate the power of Christ working through the means of grace to create and promote lasting change. Paul's point is that change happens by grace and not by works. He needs to stress this point because false apostles have come to town teaching the exact opposite.

These false apostles are preaching that in order for Gentile Christians to really be a part of Christ's Church they need to become Jews: get circumcised and keep kosher. They argue that Paul isn't a trustworthy proclaimer of God's word because he isn't as knowledgeable as they or as zealous as they. So, Paul presents an honest assessment of his former life prior to being called by Jesus on the road to Damascus. He is comparing who he used to be with who these false apostles claim to be now. He argues that by their own standards he would be even more qualified than they if that's what it takes to be an apostle. **Philippians 3:5-6** ⁵ **circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.** In other words, I was every bit the zealot that they claim to be, living out what I wrongly thought was God's will. And what Paul discovered about that life is that it was a dead end.

Philippians 3:7-9 ⁷ **But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith---**

Paul is giving an honest assessment of what his former life really was. Sure, he earned accolades among his peers, and respect from the chief priests and religious establishment that sought to destroy the Church. He was once sure that his actions made him in right standing with God. But now he reveals that life for what it really is. It was like a house with

brand new outlets, paint, and drywall with rottenness hiding behind it. What he considered to be in right standing with God was in fact as worthless as filthy trash, only good enough to be thrown on the dung heap. The reality was he had no righteousness before God at all but was wallowing in self-righteous sin. As good Lutherans who confess at the beginning of every Divine Service that ***we have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and what we have left undone. We confess that we have not loved Him with our whole heart, we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.*** We confess that our lives are the spiritual equivalent of Will Smith's slapping Chris Rock in the face. We have disrespected our Creator God, and now we seek ways to make up for it.

How can we do that? We know we need to change. We think that if we perform enough acts of contrition, we can flip our image before God and man. We develop our own personal spiritual public relations campaign by which we intend to prove to ourselves and to God that we are a changed people. But that by itself as our own work is as useless as trying to be right with God by keeping the kosher laws. That didn't work for the Jews, and it won't work for you and me. We are just putting up drywall and paint to hide the corruption that still lies inside us.

What made the difference in Paul's life was Jesus calling him to faith on the road to Damascus. He was headed with zeal to persecute the Church, but when Jesus was done with him his zeal was now to build up the Church by taking the Gospel to the Gentiles. That change was not Paul's doing but happened when he gained Christ by faith. It happened through the powerful working of the Holy Spirit changing his heart and mind. Through the free gift of faith Paul received the righteousness that he always desired- the right standing with God that he could never earn on his own. It came from Jesus who earned it for him through His perfectly obedient life, His suffering for Paul's sins in his place on the cross, His dying Paul's death and rising again to prove His sacrifice was acceptable and complete in the eyes of the Father. It was Jesus free gift to Paul. It's His free gift to you as well. It came to you in your baptism and is renewed in your heart and life by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace.

By this faith you are declared to be in right standing with God, despite your continued sinful transgressions. You don't need to launch your own public relations campaign or plot how you can flip your life. No matter what you did it would never be enough. And that's OK, because what Christ has done for you and has given you is more than enough to cover the sins of your entire life. That's the message you heard in the Declaration of Grace today. Christ is the source of true change. His Spirit is the One at work Him to flip your life around, so that you live a truly repentant life.

Paul Describes our Flipped Lives as Spirit's Work in Progress

All that being said, how can we reconcile what Christ declares us to be with what we see on a daily basis? What about that sin that continues to pour out from the rotten foundation, crumbling frame, and dangerous wiring that is our sinful heart?

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Paul here is telling us that the change in how our new life in Christ is lived out day to day doesn't happen overnight. When faith comes into our hearts, we are immediately changed from one bound for eternal hell to one given the gift of life now and eternal life to come. But how the Holy Spirit effects that change in your day-to-day living is a process that will last from this point forward until Christ calls you home. Just look at Paul's confession on where he is at. As knowledgeable and saintly as Paul was, he calls himself a work in progress; how much more should you and I consider ourselves to be the same?

That "work in progress" is the Holy Spirit's work by and large. He teaches us how we should live as children of God, shows us how we fail, and then points us to Jesus whose sacrifice forgives all our failures. In doing so He shows us the rottenness behind the drywall. But Jesus work isn't just like drywall covering it over. He is at work in your heart removing that rottenness behind the drywall for good. The power to do this comes from the never-ending supply of grace we receive through our faith. It flips your heart attitude creating in you the desire to live a new life, and encourages you to keep working at it, straining forward towards that goal. What is that goal? It is the sinless perfect life God calls us to live. Even as we fail to live it out daily, our strength and drive are renewed daily by His gift of grace that restores and renews even the most corrupted of hearts. He is working in you from the inside out, fixing the corruption behind the drywall so that what pours forth is a truly repentant life.

The Spirit does this work through the means of grace. He does the bulk of it. But you have your part in it as well. He directs, encourages and moves you to participate in the means of grace as offered in worship and Bible Study. These are the means He has chosen to work through to rebuild you inside and out. If you cut yourself off from these means you are tying the hands of the Spirit's work in your life. If you refrain from Bible Study, and receiving the Gospel through His Word preached, read, and sung, and offered in the Sacrament, it is like trying to restore a house without the proper tools to work with. This work of flipping your image from sinner to saint is not an easy process as we live out our lives in this sinful fallen world. Our new flipped nature struggles against our old sinful nature. The temptation is there to simply gloss over that sinful corruption inside, to carry on our own PR campaign that amounts to hiding the corruption behind new drywall and

paint. But the Spirit works powerfully through His chosen means. He even works through the problems in your life to call you back to Him, back to involvement with the means of grace when you wander away. His Spirit is always at work in you. You and I remain His work in progress until the day He calls us home.

Conclusion

Will Smith may indeed be able to resurrect his career through PR work of his own devising. But the work that truly needs to be done is more than he can accomplish on his own, it must be done by the Holy Spirit through repentant faith in Christ. Otherwise, it is nothing more than the work of flipping houses; glossing over the outward problems without addressing the foundational problems that will one day cause the whole building to collapse. It is the Holy Spirit who does that work in our hearts, attacking our sinful nature and exposing how it stands as an offense against God. This can be hard and painful. But we don't do this work alone. The Spirit is at work within us through the gift of faith we have in Jesus Christ. He is the source of power that keeps us forging ahead as he was with Paul. Paul says in **Philippians 3:14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus**. In repentant faith we press on throughout this life with our eyes on the end goal that is the prize of eternal life with Christ, where gone forever is our sinful nature, where we will be that perfect child of God that we long to be body and soul. Until then we are a work in progress in the hands of the Spirit. Continue to give Him plenty of opportunity to work through your involvement in the study of His Word and in His Sacraments. Amen.